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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 003950

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SUBJECT: (U) "SCIENTIFIC SALAFIS" PRESS FOR BIDOON RIGHTS

REF: KUWAIT 3534 (NOTAL)

Classified By: (U) CDA FRANK URBANCIC; REASON: 1.5 (B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Hardline Islamists are spearheading a push to resolve the status of the Bidoon, stateless persons resident in Kuwait who number in the tens of thousands. This appears to be an attempt by the so-called Scientific Salafis to portray themselves as principled, compassionate defenders of human rights, and to curry favor with the increasingly influential tribal segment of society. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The Salafi Movement ("Scientific Salafis") is taking the lead in pressing the GOK to resolve the plight of the "Bidoon," stateless Arab residents of Kuwait. The Secretary General of the Salafi Movement, Dr. Hakem al-Mutairi, slammed Justice Minister Ahmed Baqer, saying the issue would never be resolved as long he remained Minister. He wondered how Baqer -- an Islamist affiliated with Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya (the Salafi Call, aka Traditional Salafis) - could be so uncaring.

Baqer retorted that Mutairi was violating Islamic laws by turning a political issue into an ad-hominem attack. He defended the state's right to investigate the roots of Bidoon who claim Kuwaiti citizenship, noting that "thousands of individuals who pretended not to have a nationality later disclosed their original citizenship and admitted to forgery and lying." He insisted that citizenship would only be granted to those who deserve it, promised that the Bidoon would "have their fair chance" and that the Government would "try to support them in any other way possible" if they are found not to qualify for citizenship.

13. (C) The Bidoon issue has gained traction since the July 5 National Assembly elections in which the Salafi Movement progressed from one seat to three. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and National Assembly Affairs Mohammed Sharar told the Ambassador August 2 (reftel) that the issue needed to be addressed in a balanced way (i.e. not by a sweeping grant of citizenship). Sharar estimated there are now about 40,000 Bidoon, after some 26,000 "got their passports" over the past four years. He asserted that they know they are better off in Kuwait as Bidoon than they would be in their countries of origin.

14. (U) The Ministry of Defense recently approved granting citizenship to some 400 Bidoon who participated in the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. The Ministry asserted that those cases had been subjected to extensive study before being approved. The files of Bidoons among the "Kuwaiti missing persons" are also being reviewed, with the intention of granting them citizenship. (The GOK has been pursuing officially the cases of 605 persons believed to have been abducted by the Iraqis, 572 of them "Kuwaitis" and the other 33 belonging to 8 different nationalities. The figure of 572 includes 29 Bidoon.)

15. (U) MP Mohammed al-Khalifa -- not an Islamist, and considered pro-Government -- charged that officials of the Government committee investigating Bidoon cases are encouraging fraud. (For a Bidoon to regularize his status, the first step is to obtain a passport from his country of origin, in which a Kuwaiti residency permit can be placed. For a truly stateless person, that may be impossible. Not surprisingly, there are numerous reports of Bidoon obtaining bogus documents.) Al-Khalifa warned that the Interior Ministry's acceptance of fake passports endangers the security of Kuwait. (COMMENT: We assess al-Khalifa's claims to be inaccurate. Although there may be instances of the Ministry of Interior accepting false documents from Bidoons, we have not seen such cases nor has the GOK acknowledged this is an issue. Additionally, GOK security apparatuses are competent in screening documentation and maintain security standards at ports of entry comparable to those of the United States. END COMMENT.)

16. (C) CDA met with Minister Baqer August 26 and asked him about the ad hominem attacks. Baqer attributed them to political rivalry on the part of the Scientific Salafis, whom he described as a hardline splinter group that broke away from his "moderate" Salafi grouping ten years ago. He stated flatly that he opposes easy granting of Kuwaiti citizenship, because this is such a small country, with only one natural resource (oil), and "the fastest-growing population in the

world at 3.6 percent per year." He asserted that "90 percent" of the Bidoon are truly not Kuwaiti. To prove his point, he showed CDA a list of some 5,600 names of Bidoon who had "admitted their true nationality" -- Iraqi, Iranian, Saudi, Syrian, or Jordanian. He explained that after the 1991 liberation, the border was essentially open, and many people from neighboring countries came here "and joined their tribes." Now, following the strong showing of tribal candidates in the July National Assembly elections, tribes are trying to strengthen their political position further by obtaining citizenship for their kinsmen. The Minister said those Bidoon who admit their true nationality will obtain residency and work permits so they can "enjoy their life in Kuwait." He added that the Government is willing to give financial support to Bidoon who wish to emigrate to under-populated countries such as Australia or Canada. The Charge stated that the US encourages Kuwait to find a fair solution to this human-rights issue.

17. (C) COMMENT: If the Scientific Salafis are advocating for Bidoon rights in order to present themselves as principled, compassionate defenders of human rights, it's working: even liberals who vehemently oppose their larger agenda admire them for taking the lead on this issue. Some Bidoon almost certainly deserve Kuwaiti citizenship but did not or could not document their qualifications. As noted in our Human Rights Report, children of Kuwaiti mothers and Bidoon fathers do not acquire citizenship by birth. The Justice Minister's tribe-based explanation for the Scientific Salafis' campaign makes sense: the tribal segment of Kuwait's population is typically conservative Sunni, the most fertile recruiting ground for Salafis of all stripes. It must be frustrating for Bager that being part of the ruling establishment makes it harder for him to compete for the tribes' support: as a Minister, he cannot ignore the long-term budgetary implications of extending citizenship to the equivalent of five percent of the Kuwaiti population, given the generous cradle-to-grave welfare state that citizens enjoy.

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